

MATURE MARX: THE CASE AGAINST AN EPISTEMOLOGICAL BREAK  
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"The philosophers have only INTERPRETED the world differently, the point is, to CHANGE it" <sup>1</sup>

This quotation, taken along with Marx's other theses on Feuerbach, such as his critique of "contemplative materialism" as stopping at isolated man or human essence conceived of outside the aggregate of social relations and objective activity, sums up his attitude to idealist philosophy in general, as well as his dissatisfaction with Feuerbach's anthropological humanism. His was from the beginning a "revolt against the rule of thoughts."<sup>2</sup>, an attempt to "turn Hegel on his head" as he stated in his critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right; that is, to rescue what were valuable insights from idealism and to put these in the context of a materialist philosophy. The Left Hegelians such as Feuerbach thought that merely by re-interpreting the world they would solve the problems of idealist philosophy; Marx's intent was not only to criticize philosophy but to criticize and to change the real world.

Marx's scathing attack on idealism was prompted by the way in which material existence and social consciousness were treated. In Hegel, they were mere epiphenomena, emanations of the progress of the World, or Absolute, Spirit or Mind through various stages of its development to its ultimate state (the thesis-antithesis-synthesis). The "really real" to Hegel was not "real individuals, their activity and the material conditions under which they live"<sup>3</sup>, not real flesh and blood men, but an abstraction which existed purely in the transcendental realm of reason. Marx's materialist antidote to Hegel's idealism was found through political economy.<sup>4</sup>

It is the purpose of this short essay to examine the ways in which this element is retained and developed throughout Marx's career and to argue that despite various more systematic and scientific reworkings, many of the important categories of analysis were retained. There are both continuities and discontinuities between the "early" and the "mature" Marx, but no epistemological break, contrary to what has been argued particularly by Althusserian structuralists.<sup>5</sup> These lines of development are especially evident in the following items: Marx's method, including dialectics; his

treatment of the conditions underlying alienation; and related to this, the way in which he perceives the structure of capitalist society and works his way from "surface phenomena" such as markets, competition, etc. in the early works, to a mature analysis of the hidden mechanisms underpinning them.

There are three important and central components in Capital<sup>6</sup> which not only represent an advance over Marx's earlier analysis of capitalism but also serve as keys to the continuities at the heart of Marx's concerns. These three interconnected concepts are: the relations of production, surplus value, and the commodity.

The "relation" may be thought of as a basic unit of reality: it is a unity of contradictory parts, and the notion of "contradiction" and "totality" are joined in Marx's use of the dialectical method. The mode of production subsumes two types of conditions: means, or forces, of production, and social relations of production; the relations of production under capital unite two antagonistic social actors, the capitalist and the labourer, who are of necessity in conflict because of their relationship in the creation and appropriation of surplus value. It is through the historical conditions which make this appropriation possible that the worker is exploited and his labour alienated from him as labour-power, an abstract commodity which has the unique property of producing values greater than itself which then enter into the exchange process and add to the accumulation of capital, under the control of the capitalist who has rights of disposition over capital and labour. The "commodity" (in the special sense intended by Marx) is a unique product of capitalism, combining within itself the unity of use-value and exchange-value, with exchange-value becoming the dominant force in the development of the capitalist mode of production. Together, surplus value and the commodity are keys to understanding the structure of capitalist society, taken in context with the social relations of production. These concepts will be elaborated upon in the course of the ensuing discussion.

Let us first examine the concept of alienation as it is used in the early Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts and through this analysis, indicate in what form the concept remains in Marx's mature political economy. It may be recalled that Marx had objected to Feuerbach's analysis of religion as being a projection

and reification of man's reflection of himself in an idealized form, a creation not recognized by its creator. This was for Marx too psychological a model and said nothing about the relationship between man and his material conditions which were at the basis of all such idealized productions of which religion (the separation between man and his creation, the creation standing over against him as an alien force) was the exemplar. It is at this point that Marx's anthropology or ontology (the nature of man and being), his materialist philosophy and his borrowed categories of political economy converge to produce an explanation of alienation.

It is because man is an "active, sensual being" in nature that man necessarily realizes himself and his fellow actors only in and by acting on nature--by producing the means of his subsistence. Through this activity man refines his human capacities and produces objects which reflect himself (man thus "makes" himself and, in co-operation with others, makes a human, social world).

However, under certain historical conditions, the connection between productive activity and the objects of production are lost, and these objects come to take on a separate, hostile existence: under the conditions of division of labour and private property. Those who control the means by which men produce their world control both the men and their products; under capitalism, therefore, the worker becomes separated from these and as a consequence, becomes estranged from his fellow men, from himself, and from his true human nature or "species-being".

Thus the concept of alienation refers to an objective set of conditions caused by particular material arrangements. They involve a producer, a means and an object of production, and an appropriator of these in a set of property relations. These are the elements which appear in rudimentary form in the early writings of Marx. In his mature works, he develops in detail the mechanisms which link appropriation, exploitation and accumulation--and the word alienation, but not the sense of the concept, disappears.

Marx wrote the Manuscripts in 1844, the German Ideology in 1846, and he subsequently repudiated most of what he had written as "unscientific." In 1851 he began more intensive study of Ricardo although had not yet developed the full implications of

surplus value. The notebooks towards a critique of political economy (the Grundrisse) were written between 1857 and 1858 and are generally acknowledged as representing a "watershed" between Marx's early and mature works. Contained within them are the elements which would later appear in Capital, and it was at this time that Marx realized his previous analysis had dealt only with the appearances, the "surface phenomena" of political economy and the structure of capitalist society.<sup>7</sup>

Earlier, he had treated labour as any other commodity--now he realized its special nature, and this was linked to the creation of surplus value which now was to become the basis of the theory of capitalist accumulation. The extraction of surplus value under the conditions of capitalist domination becomes the motor of the process in which the world comes to be dominated by impersonal exchange relationships. Labour-power, as an abstract general category, and money, become the universal solvents by which all things are reduced to equivalents, made mobile and exchangeable, and make the growing accumulation of capital possible.

These conditions, however, presuppose historical developments whereby all personal ties, as in feudalism, have been sundered; persons and things have become freed to enter into a system of exchange relations, and a formally free labour force created to enter into contractual relationships with capital, exchanging labour-power for wage-money. However, this is an unequal exchange even if on the surface it appears equal, since labour-power, the unique commodity, creates wealth which is under the control of capitalists. By causing the worker to labour part of the day for the capitalist and only part of the day for himself, conditions are created in which stored-up value adds to the wealth-accumulating capacity of capital when the circuits of production and circulation are completed. Hence, as the worker creates more wealth, he becomes more impoverished relative to it--capital, embodying the creative power alienated from him, stands as an alien power over him which grows with the growth of capital. Accumulation becomes an end in itself, and the commodity becomes "fetishized".

It is thus in his analysis of the turning of labour into the commodity labour-power by its separation from the labourer that

Marx's analysis of surplus value relates to his earlier analysis of alienation--the term is now "exploitation." Earlier, Marx saw the relationship between man and his world as one in which productive activity mediates between the individual and the external world as the means by which he appropriates objects. Under capitalism, labour and other elements become "abstractions" (that is, the links are severed). Alienation implies the breakdown or sundering of a unity of interconnected elements (as Ollman, in his 1971 book Alienation, points out). In Capital, it is now evident that as activity goes through its metamorphosis into value, to be expressed as money, commodities, etc., these become fetishized and take on a life of their own, expressing in distorted fashion the original relation. Man's relationship to his world (which includes other men) is now mediated by the abstractions created under capitalism, just as capitalists and labourers, or buyers and sellers in the marketplace, now relate to one another only indirectly, through the mediation of exchange-value. Private property (which Marx originally saw as the cause of alienation) is now recognized by him as only one form of value and that more fundamental are the conditions which create surplus value and exchange value.

Let us now turn to an examination of dialectics, another element in Marx's development which exhibits both continuity between early and late works and was also from the very beginning, entirely different from Hegel's idealist-philosophy use of it. Marx's dialectics is both historical-materialist and treats contradictions differently--he does not merely "turn Hegel upside down" by converting idealism to materialism. In his early usage, Marx corrected Hegel by making history "march on its feet" instead of in the airy realm of Pure Reason; his principal concern was with the contradiction between bourgeoisie and proletariat and the way in which modes of production develop historically through the conflictual supercession of previous forms and social relations. In the mature works, Marx adds to this the notion of contradiction within capital itself, as between productive forces (as they develop through the socialization of accumulation and production in large-scale units), and the private ownership of those forces, that is, as Godelier puts it, between two structures, production and ownership.

## ALTERNATE ROUTES

Dialectics did not originate with Hegel but in Greek usage, the combined "dia" and "logos" meaning "to reason by splitting in two", of phenomena which are split, their elements in clashing opposition<sup>9</sup>. From the beginning, there was implied in the notion of dialectics a world in flux, moving, changing and transforming into its opposite. The world is conceived of as a unity of opposites in contradiction with one another, even if at any particular "moment" appearances seem static and in harmony. This conception was adopted both by Hegel and by Marx. However, Marx rejected Hegel's progress of an "independent objective Mind" and posited instead the movement of history through human subjects actively creating and changing their world. There is no ultimate reality which transcends passive humans and proceeds in mechanical and subjectless fashion; rather, to Marx, contradictions and conflicts which move history are within and between human actors and structural elements which they have created but which nevertheless condition and limit them at any one point.

This unity in contradiction which is material reality also has production as its basis, grasped via the categories not of philosophy but of political economy. Components are related together internally in a totality, a set of circumstances which are the products of historical processes and which determine at any point the conceptual status of elements within that totality. It is for these reasons that the starting point of the scientific method in Marxian political economy must be fundamentally different from that of Idealist philosophy. As Nicolaus comments:

"Unlike Hegel's Logic, and unlike Marx's own initial attempts earlier, this beginning begins not with a pure, indeterminate, eternal and universal abstraction, but rather with a compound, determinate, delimited and concrete whole..." ("Foreword" to the 1973 Pelican Grundrisse; and see "The Method of Political Economy", Marx, Grundrisse)

A significant example in the mature Marx's work of the particular and "delimited" concrete entity is the commodity as central to understanding what is unique and crucial about the mechanisms of capitalist society. It makes possible the analysis of value which contains within it the unity of two contradictory elements, use-value and exchange-value, with the latter dominating, just as there is in capitalist society as a whole a "unity in domination" of

capital and labour, bourgeoisie and proletariat. Beginning the analysis with a particular concrete entity such as the commodity, illustrates that the unity of production and consumption is not direct and immediate, but is part of a process linked to other conditions, as Nicolaus points out.<sup>10</sup> In other words, we are not concerned with the universal qualities of production and consumption as they would be useful in analysing any and all societies, but rather, with historically specific ones, those under conditions which create and sustain capitalist society. The commodity represents the essence of the uniqueness of the historical product, capitalism, because it contains within it all of the other contradictions of the capitalist mode of production.

As Marx proceeded with his detailed study of political economy in the Grundrisse notebooks, Nicolaus (1973) observes, his methodological approach changed: one must not work up from simple, general, abstract relations to complex particular wholes, but from the particular to the general, an essential difference between idealist and materialist dialectics. This has implications for the role of "abstraction" as a methodological procedure. As Keat and Urry (1975) point out, Marx was not a positivist—he wished to lay bare the internal structure of the capitalist mode of production and society, hidden workings which are related together internally and not readily observable in appearances or isolated "social facts"; his was a "realist" conception. Social reality could therefore be understood only by examining both parts and whole, both concrete facts and abstract categories, by a process of moving back and forth between them in order to reach closer and closer approximations to the nature of this reality in its historical specificity. The process of abstraction involves a reduction of phenomena to their "pure form" in order to grasp how particular processes are worked out and interrelated (and to separate out residues of previous forms which have not yet been superceded).<sup>11</sup> Thus, for example, the significance of the spinning jenny cannot be understood unless we know the context in which it is located in the relations of production; similarly, labour takes on a particular meaning because of the social relations in which it is embedded: the subordination of labour to capital and the domination of the commodity form of value.

## ALTERNATE ROUTES

The contention made by such theorists as Althusser that there was a break between the early "ideological" and "philosophical" Marx and the mature "scientific" Marx is, therefore, misleading, as well as incorrect. Marx was throughout his career both a materialist philosophically and an empiricist scientifically (and it could be added, an "Enlightenment child" who did not see the problems with scientificity that concern us today). The early Marx was interested in uncovering the false or reified nature of notions by relating them to the material conditions of existence; the mature Marx with examining the hidden mechanisms of capitalism. At both points in his development, he was therefore interested in what was in the world of appearance not readily apparent but hidden and examinable only through scientific categories. Philosophy (as a bourgeois activity) was for Marx unscientific; the nature of reality, society and history had to be examined scientifically--it could be said, then, that as he developed he merely became more scientific, more systematic.

Although he recognized individuals as the creators of their social world and history, at no point did he ever begin from purposive action of individual actors. He did not begin, that is, from presuppositions of a psychologistic utilitarianism, but began, rather, from the structured unity in which actions were to be understood. Unlike functionalism, however, this unity was one of inherent contradictions, and it is this point which links the notions of "dialectics" and "totality." Thus, Marx's theoretical and methodological approaches separate him from both idealism and utilitarianism on the one hand, and also from positivistic social science and functionalism on the other.

To sum up, there are a number of continuities (despite differences in terminology and focus) which link the early and mature Marx, despite some discontinuities which may legitimately be considered of a developmental kind:

- 1) Society is the product of struggle between man and nature and between groups of men, with material conditions (economic organization, means of subsistence) as the focal point of this struggle.
- 2) Since "man makes himself" through his activities, knowledge of society must be concerned both with action and with objective

conditions in which actions occur; they are not merely epiphenomenal of a hidden "ultimate reality."

- 3) Society is a structure of interrelated parts in which social processes containing contradictory elements generate conflicts-- society and history are therefore to be analysed in dynamic and dialectical terms in the context of specific objective conditions.
- 4) "False consciousness," "alienation", or "reification" are processes which contribute to masking the true nature of social relations, products and society from their creators and arise because of those social relations and products in particular societal contexts. Philosophy, religion, and the "fetishism of commodities" are examples of masked and misunderstood processes.